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A REQUIEM FOR AURAL FICTION: ON CAPITALIZING THE SOUND MEDIUM'S POTENTIAL FOR (TRANSMEDIA) STORYTELLING

ABSTRACT

The sound medium may be – and has been – used to tell fictional stories, through several platforms, like the radio, disc, and digital recordings. However, in comparison to other media, solely aural fictional narratives have, for long, been rare. On the other hand, there is evidence that storytelling on this medium is being revived in this digital era. In this paper, we aim to track down and describe some of the available practices concerning this type of fictional narrative, in Portugal and in other countries where they are more common. This medium – so our argument goes – is not being sufficiently harnessed by storytellers and media producers, but it has very interesting features for storytelling, namely for transmedia storytelling, which may be highly enriched by the use of more diverse media forms. Moreover, the digital environment of the Internet, that has become a basis for the distribution of media content, may also provide the means to surpass some limitations of the aural medium.

KEYWORDS

Aural narratives; fiction; transmedia storytelling; the sound medium

INTRODUCTION

Fictional narratives are pervasive and play a vital role in every human society. Stories can be told through a wide array of media. However, solely aural fictional narratives are much less common than narratives on other media. In the past, big productions were created for the radio, and people eagerly gathered round radio receivers to listen to their favorite stories. When television was disseminated, however, attention was transferred to the new medium and aural narratives decreased drastically. Another reason

for this may be that radio transmission obscures the stories' fictional nature, and may thus originate panic, as in Orson Welles' broadcast of *War of the Worlds*. Anyway, today, aural fiction is rare in countries like Portugal, and mostly limited to a small offer in audiobooks, which usually do not explore the full potential of the sound medium. In countries like the United Kingdom, the United States of America, or Brazil, audio fiction is more common, but it still represents a small segment of the market.

Our argument here is that the sound medium presents, as all others, medium-specific features that not only limit, but also promote creativity; as such, they present interesting resources for storytelling, namely for transmedia storytelling, a new form of story that unfolds across several media and platforms, though most transmedia franchises do not include aural extensions. Some may say that the sound medium has become obsolete, but recent productions are proving the opposite. Here, we present a small survey of aural narratives through time, in several countries, and describe a few examples, so as to clarify their main semiotic features and whether they are being fruitfully used. We will further explore the potential of aural fictional narratives, both as isolated means of storytelling and as part of transmedia stories, and propose ways to capitalize them.

SOUND MEDIUM OR SOUND MEDIA?

When we talk of the sound medium, radio comes to mind first. But there are other aural media, like the disc (vinyl, CD or DVD), and digital sound files. In the past, each medium was defined according to the system used to convey it: literature on books, cinema on theaters (or television or video), radio on radio sets. The advent of the digital format, however, made media content compatible and transmittable through multiple platforms (Miller, 2008, p. 4; Bolin, 2007, p. 244). Today, radio and sound recordings are available on the internet, web productions may be reproduced on the radio and on disc, we can play them on a computer, CD player, iPod or cellphone, at home, in our cars, while jogging, etc. Moreover, "it becomes increasingly difficult to make distinctions between different media technologies, as they adopt functions and forms from each other" (Bolin, 2007, p. 237). Jenkins (2006, p. 13-14) argues that we need to distinguish between the "delivery technologies" that enable communication, and the proper media, the "protocols" or "social and cultural practices that have grown up around that technology".

In this sense, it may be useful to define media in terms of the languages or semiotic codes used, whatever the transmission technology.

Codes may be verbal (written or oral), visual (static or moving images) or aural (sound). Each medium may use only one or combine several codes. As for solely aural artifacts, they use only sound, but within sound there are different elements. For Crook (1999, p. 53), sound includes “words and music as much as pure sound effects.” Monaco (1981, p. 180) distinguishes, within film sound, music, speech, and “noise” or sound effects. Hunt and colleagues (2010, p. 166) break filmic sound in diegetic and non-diegetic, but within those categories they include the same elements. Speech, music and sound effects are, therefore, the features available to the sound medium. By *sound medium* we mean the content transmitted solely through sound, whatever the delivery platform.

A BRIEF HISTORICAL SURVEY ON AURAL NARRATIVES

The sound medium started with recordings on disc for devices like the gramophone, in the late 19th century; they included “literature” and “drama”, but the majority was dedicated to music (Cazeneuve, 1976, pp. 84-86). In the 1920s, the radio was disseminated, and, as soon as 1923, fictional narratives were already being designed especially for this medium (Crook, 1999, pp. 5-6). Since then, for a few decades, called the radio’s golden years, this medium played a significant role in people’s lives around the world. At that time, radio drama was very common and greatly appreciated by large audiences.

In Latin countries, radionovelas, or radio soap operas, were particularly successful. The most popular in Portugal was *Simplemente Maria* (Simply Maria). Adapted from the script by Celia Alcántara¹, the story was broadcasted daily, in one-hour episodes, between 1973 and 1974. Many still remember it, posting nostalgic comments on weblogs and reenacting it on TV and theatres. People (mostly women) used to cling to the radio set after lunch to listen to the melodramatic, suspense-ridden story of Maria, a simple country girl that comes to Lisbon in search of success and romance, but has to fight society’s prejudices. These were elaborate productions made exclusively for the radio, where actors played the narrator and the characters; there were also sound effects and a strong musical soundtrack.

The most famous narrative on the radio is Orson Welles’ telling of *The War of the Worlds*, in 1938, known for the mass panic it created, since listeners thought it was a true report. H.G. Wells’ original story was adapted,

¹ Retrieved from <http://www.lanacion.com.ar/708310-murio-celia-alcantara-creadora-de-teleteatros>.

and presented as a radio news coverage of an alien invasion. Actors play the reporters on studio and in the field and other participants, such as Professor Pierson, an astronomer who is consulted, played by Welles. Musical interludes by a live orchestra appear as part of the broadcasting and there are extensive sound effects, like buzzing sounds from the Martian spacecraft, explosions, sirens, etc. The show's effect was probably due to its realism, created by the sound coherence with normal broadcast (the musical show, interruptions to tell breaking news, live reports), and to the fact that some listeners did not catch the beginning, where its fictional nature was clarified (Lubertozi & Holmsten, 2001).

In the UK, BBC's productions were particularly prolific: they read famous literary works, but they also adapted works by authors like Shakespeare, Arthur Conan Doyle and Tolkien to radio drama and produced original works, or "originations" (Beck, N/D), like *Doctor Who* audio episodes. The last two types were dramatized, and included sound effects and music; some were recorded live at theaters. The most popular stories are still available on CD.

Due to the medium's dominance at the time, these were ambitious productions. In general, they were called radio drama, or radio theatre (e.g., Beck, N/D). However, since the advent of television, these productions were mostly transferred to the new medium (Crook, 1999, p. 3). BBC is an exception: they continued to produce radio dramas until today, especially on Radio 4 and/or on podcast. But, radio in many countries, like Portugal, does not broadcast fiction anymore. Portuguese radio often includes comedy shows, which are sometimes narratized and even dramatized, but their goal is not to tell consistent stories. In Portugal, the only audio narratives available are audiobooks; most are distributed online, but the few that we found spoken in Portuguese are from Brazil, which means there is hardly any national production. In audiobooks, someone simply reads the book out loud, following the literary text to the letter, usually with no dramatization, sound effects or music.

Recently, however, audio drama is reemerging through revival movements on the Internet, both by people who still remember the radio's golden years and by young people. Good examples are *Radio Drama Revival*, a radio show and website, where listeners can hear radio dramas and submit their own for free; and the Brazilian project *Radionovelas*, that is remaking old-time hits, available for sale on CD. This kind of projects can be easily accessed on the web, but they are not usually as widespread as stories on other media.

Serial, however, has garnered widespread notoriety: it is a podcast produced by WBEZ Chicago. The story begins when the reporter Sarah Koenig is asked to prove Adnan Syed's innocence in the murder of his ex-girlfriend, Hae Min Lee, 15 years ago, for which he has been in prison ever since in spite of the inconsistent evidence. The first season of twelve episodes is available for free on the website, and a second is up-coming. The podcast is extensively told by the narrator, but includes some testimonies, conversations and phone calls with other characters, played by other actors. There are some sound effects in these recordings, and music in the beginning and end of each episode, but they are not significant. In fact, it sounds much like an audiobook. Nonetheless, it has captivated public attention. Becky Chung (2014) calls it a "wildly popular longform podcast". Mathew Poe (2014) goes further, saying: "there are still two Americas: the half that is totally consumed by the podcast 'Serial', and the one that will be once someone convinces them to start the first episode."

TRANSMEDIA STORYTELLING

In the last two decades, a new form of storytelling developed: *trans-media storytelling*. The term, coined by Jenkins (2003), describes stories that unfold across multiple media platforms, where each extension offers "new insights into the characters and new experiences of the fictional world." According to Scolari (2009, p. 587), transmedia storytelling "is a particular narrative structure that expands through both different languages (verbal, iconic, etc.) and media (cinema, comics, television, video games, etc.)." For Bernardo (2011, p. XXIV), it uses "multiple platforms simultaneously to tell a story".

Transmediation is more than telling the "same" story in different media (Bolin, 2007, p. 245-246). In Jenkins' view (2006, p. 95-96), each extension makes "a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole", while "each medium does it does best". Each extension tells a different part of the story or tells it differently, so they become different entry points into the story (Jenkins, 2006, p. 95-96; Miller, 2008, p. 150). Jenkins (2006, p. 96) says that extensions should be "self-contained": be comprehensible on their own, but together constitute a whole. The need for "self-containment" is arguable, since many transmediations on digital platforms use fragmented materials (e.g. Phillips, 2012). In any case, they are woven to create "one compelling whole": if we consume all the extensions, we get a different experience (Jenkins, 2006, pp. 101-102).

Miller (2008, p. 150) stresses that, in transmedia storytelling, “at least some of the story is offered on an interactive medium so that people can participate in it”. Interactivity may be achieved through games, by letting the fans co-create the story, or through interaction with the public on web platforms, by phone or email, as if characters were living people; as such, the story can achieve a “sense of ongoing reality” (Bernardo, 2011, p. XVIII). Games are usually not narrative, but they may include new narrative material. Furthermore, each extension leaves gaps and clues that will lead the public to search other extensions (Jenkins, 2006, p. 94).

So, transmedia storytelling is supposed to use different media *and languages*, but most high-profile cases include no aural narratives, in any form; none of the authors consulted even mention them. *The Matrix*, for instance, one of the pioneer transmedia stories, released three films, comics (on the web and then in print), a series of short films, *Animatrix*, and three digital games, two of which incorporate video scenes that add new information. So, apart from the comics, all the extensions are audiovisual, which is not very diverse, semiotically speaking. The *Lost* saga, besides the TV episodes, includes short video episodes on the Internet (*webisodes*), novels created by fans, a visual guide (book illustrated with photos), and games, like an ARG which included commercials, fake websites, emails, and phone calls; here we have a wider array of media, but again, there are no aural narratives (unless we count phone calls). ABC and Sky1 produced podcasts but they only discuss the show, thus not extending the story.

The film *The Blair Witch Project* (1999), on the other hand, was presented as footage collected by three young people who disappeared while investigating the Blair Witch legend. Other materials, intended to make the “true story” believable, were posted on the website: photographs of evidence found by the police, video interviews with experts and the parents, and the contents of audio cassettes found in their car. These recordings are solely aural and add new information (e.g., about an argument between the characters), though they are not complete stories. Other lower-profile transmedia stories include aural extensions, often because they derive from audio/radio drama. *The Flickerman*, for instance, is a thriller about Cornelius Zane-Grey, who learns that his life is being monitored and exposed on the Internet (Dann, 2012). It was distributed on several radio stations and the Internet, but included videos, fake news sites, and character blogs and facebook profiles, where the audience could participate.

In sum, though there are exceptions, most transmedia stories depend heavily on multiple types of audiovisual artifacts, but they all share the

same semiotic code. In this model, each extension is supposed to make a particular contribution to the whole (Jenkins, 2006, pp. 95-96), in terms of the story but also of the languages used (Scolari, 2009, p. 587), but these extensions are simply more of the same. As such, each transmedia extension does not make a particular formal contribution. Transmedia stories usually include books, both solely verbal and illustrated, games and data of multiple natures on web platforms, but, except for stories promoted by audio fiction authors (which are still few), there are hardly any solely aural narratives. Though no one can argue that all media should be used in every transmedia story, it is surprising that most do not consider the potential of sound narratives to increase the formal diversity of the story.

THE SOUND MEDIUM'S POTENTIAL FOR (TRANSMEDIA) STORYTELLING

The sound medium seems to be threatened by the audiovisual form because it lacks image. However, radio is hardly a “blind” medium (Crook 1999, p. 53; Beck, 1999). Crook (1999, pp. 7-8) argues that, though we have no image, our brains “construct an imaginative world based on image”; therefore, radio drama “is auditory in the physical dimension but equally powerful as a visual force in the psychological dimension”. Beck (1999, paragraph 6.5) attributes prejudices against radio to our culture’s “oculocentrism”, a worldview centered on vision, which alienates the other senses. However, the sound medium is actually very close to the first medium of expression – the spoken word (Crook, 1999, p. 8).

According to Gaudreault and Marion (2004, p. 58), all media have an “intrinsic configuration”, a series of constraints that limit what can be relayed, how human thought can be materialized, and thus present a kind of specific “resistance”. On the other hand, “a constraint is not a limit, because a constraint is also the source, and even the condition, of creativity” (Gaudreault & Marion, 2004, p. 60). Without image, we have to create alternatives for presenting information, and that generates new ideas that might not have emerged otherwise.

Audiobooks are not the same as books. Reading implies a personal interpretation of the text. In audiobooks, the teller gives more emphasis to certain words, and applies a certain tone of voice, which already supplies the text with meanings and emotions. However, the sound medium has other creatively stimulating potentialities for storytelling, which are usually not capitalized in audiobooks. Firstly, speech may be dramatized by several people, playing the different roles. Dramatization makes the telling more

realistic, and less tedious, which some audiobooks are. It also allows the listener to create a more vivid mental image of the story. As for music, Martinez (2004, p. 165) believes that it plays an essential “intersemiotic” role in multi-language media like the cinema: it connects symbiotically with the other records to create new meanings; general signification is enriched by the different attributes of each language. Hunt and colleagues (2010, p. 58) say filmic music can “provide a backdrop” to the events and dialogue, which allows the listener to “position” him/herself emotionally towards the story. Stateri (N/D, p. 1), for his part, believes that music is the art that “presents the biggest strength in expressing human emotions”. Background music, in several media, “amplifies or completes the emotional expression of a piece adding to its value” (Stateri, N/D, p. 1). A musical theme may provide an “environment”, emphasize certain parts, or even lead the listeners to “ecstasy”, by inciting “immersion in the fantasy and fruition of the contents” (Stateri, N/D, pp. 2-4). This applies to all media that use music along with other semiotic features, including the sound medium.

Monaco (1981, p. 180) states that speech and music (in film sound), “receive more attention because they have specific meaning”; however, sound effects are “where the real construction of the sound environment takes place.” Just like dramatized speech, sound effects inspire a more realistic mental scene of the story: it is not just that someone tells us a story, but as if we are actually there, witnessing it aurally. The fact that we cannot see allows us to concentrate on the story, and makes space for imagination. This apparent lack of physicality is probably what endows audio contents with a sort of magical aura (Beck, 1999). Aural narratives have an intimate, confessional tone: the teller’s voice seems to penetrate our minds, as if we were sharing his/her most intimate secrets. Beck (1999, paragraph 6.4) believes that the radio compensates for its “blindness and vacuity, for example, by its negotiating between the interior voice (...) and the external...”

The combination of features can also enrich aural fiction: they can be used creatively, in tandem or contradictorily, or mimic other media formats, besides the typical literary model of audiobooks, or even the theatrical model, which, though closer to audio drama, has to be adapted. In Orson Welles’ version of *The War of the Worlds*, for instance, a (deceiving) realism was achieved by enacting, through a coherent use of several resources, a radio broadcast and news report. As such, the usual model was successfully subverted, in a creative medium-specific style.

As for transmedia storytelling, besides its obvious commercial advantages, it has the power to generate deeper, richer, more lifelike and

immersive stories (e.g., Phillips, 2012, p. 5). Audio narratives can function as an indeed semiotically different entry point to the story, in a more intimate tone than the usual audiovisual variations. They may be traditional audio narratives, or, for example, mimic communications emanating from the story. In the Blair Witch case, it was a cassette recording; others could be telephone calls or even radio shows by the characters. Moreover, they may tell full, self-contained stories or simply provide extra information that allows us to understand the story better.

CONCLUSION

When the digital era began, many prophesized that old media would be replaced by the new. Long before, many prophesized that television would override the radio. However, although delivery technologies evolve and get replaced, the media that continue to satisfy “some core human demand”, prevail (Jenkins, 2006, pp. 13-14). Recent practices are proving that the sound medium is not dead, not even for storytelling. Chung (2014) suggests that cases like *Serial*, as well as the recent increase in audiobook sales, show that “the old-school form of oral storytelling” is being revived: “Maybe today, we’ve all become tired of talking. Maybe we’re ready to listen, for a change.” For Crook (1999, p. 3), though it has been highly “unappreciated and understated”, radio drama “has developed with sophistication and explosive energy”, and is now a significant part of people’s cultural lives around the world.

However, as Crook (1999, p. 4) argues, radio theory is highly under-developed and continually struggles to legitimize radio drama as an art form. Specific studies on audio fiction are scarce; most are historiographical, mainly about BBC’s productions, but they are hard to make, since most radio shows were not recorded (Beck, N/D). Furthermore, film theory is often used to analyze audio narratives, while many call it a “literary” form (e.g. Crook, 1999, p. 3), or frame it as theatre. Contributions in these areas may be instructive, since there are commonalities, but the sound medium is not literary, nor theatrical, nor cinematic. It is a specific medium of its own right. The revival of audio fiction implies a growing need to investigate it, especially in the digital environment, which significantly changes its making and reception.

Our analysis suggests that projects born digital or by young producers are often gratuitous, while productions by broadcasting companies and not-so-young freelancers are sold. This proves that the financing system is

still struggling between old and new models, as Jenkins (2006) suggested. The transmedia model in particular demands that fans “do their homework”, but young consumers take “pleasure in tracking down character backgrounds and plot points and making connections between different texts within the same franchise” (Jenkins, 2003). Phillips (2012, p. 6) states that transmedia storytelling “is feeding a core hunger of their truest fans”, and this is also true for audio fiction. People have become freer to search for the experiences they prefer, as well as to create and distribute their own creations; if they are choosing audio fictions, it means they still fulfill core human needs. Even when not all the sound features are capitalized, as in *Serial*, if the story is gripping, listeners will be compelled to follow it and to spread the word, which enables financial viability.

The Internet seems to be a center for accessing most media, as well as a source of inspiration for new narrative experiences (Jenkins, 2006, pp. 118-119). It also provides a space for creative freedom for independent authors, which can easily spread their works, although financial models still have to be matured (Dann, 2012, p. 345; Phillips, 2012, p. xi). Finally, because it conjoins several languages and media, the Internet may help audio fiction by clarifying its fictional nature, thus avoiding panic phenomena as those mentioned above; also, it provides a basis which may include visual anchors, which still seem to be important, so that the public may remember and share the aural stories they love.

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